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Review: FANG Lijun and Cynical Realism - LI Xiangting

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Fang Lijun and Cynical Realism

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Fang Lijun is the most important representative of Post '89 New Wave Art in China, and of the unique mode of discourse collectively created by the artists who constitute this wave — Cynical Realism, a psychological term for the philosophical mix of emotional ennui and rogue humor that pervaded Chinese society in the first half of the 1990s.

Post '89 is the conceptual milieu that gave rise to Fang Lijun's art and his Cynical Realism. Post '89 is the result of the Tian'anmen Incident — the defeat of a rationale behind a mass movement to introduce Western democracy, a defeat which resulted in a widespread sense of loss and need for introspection, and which dredged up strata of cultural bewilderment and helplessness. Post '89 is also the universal suspicion of any idealistic attempt to construct a new Chinese culture using Western modern art and modern ideologies. Nietzsche, Sartre, and all of the thinkers produced by Western modernism will never again provide psychological or artistic support for the younger generation of Chinese artists. This can clearly be seen in the changes three generations of post-Cultural Revolution artists have undergone and in the background against which the Cynical Realists grew up.

The Cynical Realists were all born in the 1960s and graduated from art colleges in the 1980s. They are the Third Generation of post-Cultural Revolution artists. The First Generation were those artists who had been sent down to the countryside as ''Intellectual Youth'' when the Cultural Revolution terminated. Maturing at the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, this generation defined truth and virtue as the key concepts at the core of their artistic output. The hallmark of the work of this generation was the resurgence of social critique and investigation into human nature. The Western theories of modern art now flooding into China nurtured the Second Generation of post-Cultural Revolution artists, who emerged in the mid-1980s. '85 New Wave, typified by a strong sense of cultural critique and a meta-perspective on existential states. The Cynical Realists were only beginning primary school in the 1970s, and they found themselves flung into a society in which concepts were continually changing. For them, the Cultural Revolution is only a childhood memory. They grew up with the opening of Chinese society to the outside world. They were let loose on society in 1989, at a time when the exhibition of Chinese Modern Art (''China/Avant-Garde'' exhibition) in Beijing presented the achievements of a decade of realist thought and when various Western philosophies served as ideological models. Yet, no sooner had they clamored to assume center stage than they found themselves up against repression from those in positions of authority. The Tian'anmen Incident occurred soon after. The discovery that the ideal of rescuing Chinese culture — both society and art, was utterly void left this generation of artists with only the chance debris of a hasty encounter. Rejecting the idealism and bravura of the artists preceding them, the new generation brought the Olympian perspective of their predecessors down to eye-level as they focused their sights on the mundane reality surrounding them and from a roguish perspective painted themselves and slices of life that were familiar, depressing, adventitious, and absurd. The majority consequently refused to emulate the various modes of discourse derived from the West in the mid-1980s and sought instead to find new possibilities within realism, introduced from the West in the early twentieth century and dominant in Chinese artistic circles ever since.

Fang Lijun has the classic pedigree of this new generation, and in his work we can see the significant formative influences of his social background. Born in 1963, his childhood and early teens took place during the Cultural Revolution. He remembers gang fights as one of his major childhood pastimes. This undoubtedly reflects the impact on children of a social background ideologically dominated by class struggle and filled with the clash of mass factions in the Cultural Revolution. Yet Fang Lijun remained timid and vulnerable, and the frequent humiliations he suffered because of his family background form the greatest influence on his childhood. The Communist state ideology maintained that those unfortunate enough to have been born into families that were wealthy prior to 1949

— and Fang Lijun's grandfather was once a rich man — were the designated class enemies of the broad revolutionary masses. This was the fundamental ethical criterion taught to Fang Lijun and all other children, and indeed to all adults, at that time. Although class struggle and factional warfare led children into gang fights, one basic option remained free to them — play.

Once ideological terminology was transformed through play, the ideology could no longer harm children. When, as a young child, Fang Lijun witnessed the grandfather he so dearly loved become the selected target of class struggle at a mass criticism meeting, the ethical criteria utterly transformed by ideology created a deep-felt emotional trauma in him, although at that time he had no way of expressing it. Such trauma, whether induced by the gang fights of children under the influence of class struggle, or by the private humiliation induced by his grandfather's public torture, could only result in the sense that human nature was evil. Yet the evil of those people was portrayed by the ideology of that time as goodness and truth. This was something which a child, and even the majority of adults, at that time could not see through. Trauma was the mental torment delivered on the younger generation by this contradiction and doubt.

> ''I now think of my whole life before China opened up to the outside world as hatred and struggle from beginning to end,''

Fang Lijun remembers.

> ''Because I was born into the wrong class, I had to learn at a very early age how to put up, shut up, and fake it. In 1976 when Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong died in succession and we went to pay our respects, my father gave me a look, and I knew I was supposed to cry, but I couldn't. But then I cried uncontrollably and people came up to pacify me. My teachers praised me. I then realized that if I behaved in a particular way, I'd be commended. And so this was one of the results of my childhood education. My schooling had taught me the exact opposite of what was intended, but probably at that time I had already become two-faced. You have no choice in the matter. Your childhood environment is just too oppressive for that.''

These experiences Fang Lijun can never forget, and they form the point of inception of his art — the attitude of a cynic and rogue confronting a highly repressive system of values.

In 1980 when Fang Lijun commenced his studies in a secondary school specializing in fine arts, China had embarked on its policy of opening up to the outside world. In society and the art world emerged an intellectual trend of questioning and criticizing the Cultural Revolution and the arts it had produced. This enabled Fang Lijun to see works of art quite different from those he had encountered earlier. He was fond of the artists of the ''Intellectual Youth'' generation who were using their own forms of expression, and so realized that art could be created without following formulas that had simply been handed down from the authorities. But as a student at a art school, he became increasingly keen to study the techniques of realism.

When Fang Lijun entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1985, the craze for cultural critique was getting into full stride and modern Western philosophical theories were flooding into China. In the fine arts the '85 New Wave Art that made the total reliance on Western modern art its criterion was in full flourish, and like many New Wave artists Fang Lijun took to reading quite difficult philosophical texts, although he was little influenced by them. Only the emphasis on humanism in Western philosophy and the affirmation of the value of the existence of the individual made an impact in China, yet the philosophy of day-to-day living was described in the language of that time as, ''Play at life, play with the future, play.'' At that time Fang Lijun was over twenty and, beyond his personal quest to better master the techniques of realism, he increasingly sought to enjoy a life of freedom. Perhaps a libertarian philosophy lay behind the ideal at ''playing at life,'' and this provides a fundamental connection with the Tian'anmen democratic movement. Fang naturally took part in this movement and saw for himself its tragic consequences. This new inversion of good and evil, right and wrong, and of truth itself made a fresh psychological impact on Fang Lijun. When Fang Lijun completed his first batch of oil paintings he commented.

> ''We would rather be described as painters of loss, ennui, and crisis, or as rogues, or as the bewildered, but we will never again be deceived. Never again attempt to educate us using the old methods, because any precept you might teach us will only attract a hundred questions, and we will finally reject it and toss it on the trash heap.''

Of course, in reality, Fang Lijun had never flung any state ideology onto any trash heap.

The approach of Fang Lijun and of the previous two generations of artists was utterly different. His predecessors did not believe in expending any effort to use forms of opposition to construct new concepts of value. They believed that ultimately one can only save oneself. Yet if through rogue humor they expressed their sense of ennui, this would surely be the best way both to save, and at the same time parody, themselves.

I have used the term rogue humor (*popi youmo* 潑皮幽默) to describe the characteristic feature of cynical realism, but ''rogue'' is a term which encompasses a Chinese cultural concept of cynicism. It simultaneously embraces the notions of joking, roisterousness, untrammelled behavior, lack of restraint, indifference, and the ability to see through everything. In 1924 the writer Zhou Zuoren touched on many similar ideas in his essay *Pojiaogu* 破脚骨: ''*Pojiaogu* is what in Mandarin is called *wulai* 無賴 or *guanggun* 光棍; in ancient Chinese, *popi* 潑皮 or *poluohu* 潑落戶; in the Shanghai dialect, *liumang* 流氓; in the Nanking dialect, *liuhu* 流戶 or *qingpi* 青皮, in Japanese, *gorotsuki* and in English *rogue*.'' Zhou Zuoren uses the term in the context of the Spanish picaresque novel *(novelas de picaro)* and refers to the *popi* character Niu the Second in the novel *The Water Margin* 水滸伝. Lin Yutang even more enthusiastically praised the concept of the rogue — the *fanglanghan* 放浪漢 or the *liulanghan* 流浪漢 — writing that ''Today when liberal freedoms and individual freedoms are threatened, perhaps only the rogue or the spirit of the rogue can liberate us, so that we do not all end up as disciplined, obedient, and regimented soldiers in the same uniform and with the same rank and number in the one big army.'' The rogue is the last and staunchest enemy of authoritarianism. The noted sinologist John Minford has written in a similar vein, chronicling how a new *liumang* culture sprang up on the barren wasteland of post-Maoist China, describing *liumang* as a term difficult to translate but falling somewhere between the concepts of ''loafer, hoodlum, hobo, bum and punk.''

How does Fang Lijun use the vocabulary of his paintings to signify his grasp of the sense of rogue humor or cynicism? In his earliest works, *Pencil Drawing No. 1 ~ 3* (cat. nos. 6 - 8), we see one of his earliest lexical signifiers that he has continued to employ throughout his career — the clean-shaved head. Fang Lijun has a shaved head, and in modern-day life the shaved head is both a striking statement and a sign of individuality, yet it is often also associated with the lout, the rogue, or some negative character. Yet the earliest skinheads tended to cluster in non-individual packs, indicating that the shaved head also conveyed a sense of ideological education and regulation, and simultaneously indicating a form of withdrawal and roguish rebelliousness. After 1989, Fang Lijun's clean-shaved head underwent major changes as a lexical signifier of classic rogue humor. The shaved head could be grinning or dumbly staring, or the head could be viewed from behind in innocent phrenological relief. Yawns were used to convey a sense of acute boredom, removing all significance from the features of the face. A rogue's shaved head with a meaningless expression enabled a form of non-meaning to dissolve a system of meaning associated with rebellion and satire. Yet Fang Lijun used himself and his friends as the models for the image of the man with the shaved head, thus translating this rebelliousness mockery into self-mockery and deriving an image of personal escape from a system of meaning. Another major lexical stock of images in Fang Lijun's paintings are the empty and expansive images of blue skies, white clouds, and vast oceans, which form the first confines and emplacements for his figures. As images, the skies and oceans express a sense of self-liberation from internalized repression. The Chinese expression ''taking one step back into the expanse of ocean and the vastness of the sky'' relates to the image of roguish satire and ennui. Not obeying, yet not opposing, an ideology, is the stance of those ''not concerned by things,'' and those who feel themselves to ''not be part of the scene.'' The mindscape of such a personality thereby acquires a sense of the expanse of ocean and the vastness of the sky.'' At the same time, the image of the ocean-sky serves as a contrastive metaphor, strengthening the images of the rogue and of meaninglessness and throwing them into high relief. The technique of using a minimum of detailed brush strokes to emphasise non-expression ensures that the painting maintains a non- emotional neutrality, expressing tranquillity and indifference, breaking though the atmosphere of ''being on the spot.'' Throughout his career, Fang Lijun has tended to use pure, bright, and clear colors that preserve the pleasure gained from inner liberation and purification. However, since 1993 he has moved in the direction of semi-tones, using a more severe plainness to heighten the lexicon of satire and self-parody.

In 1993 his artistic vocabulary also made the shift from rogue images to paintings of images of underwater swimming. The surfaces of his canvases have submerged to more tranquil depths and the neutrality of the images has intensified. His internal image, underwater swimming, expresses a latent premonition or omen within a daily context. Yet this deep tranquillity harbors a certain menace. Most recently he has begun to combine the two styles, so that from the submarine tranquillity of his paintings a roguish, dumb grin now gazes out at us, a heightened element of counter-satire.

Cynicism and rogue humor are forms of spiritual self-liberation, and are not merely signs of the Post '89 period. They can even be regarded as one traditional modus operandi of Chinese intellectuals, of which many examples can be found from Chinese history, especially from times of political oppression. The literati of the Wei-Jin period posed with all of the self-mockery of crazed scholars, and their untrammelled personal lives served as a counterweight to the heavy political pressure brought to bear on them and as a path for achieving their goals of self-liberation. The famous Wei-Jin masterpiece *New Anecdotes and Worldly Tales* 世説新語 contains countless examples. In the section of that work titled ''Untrammelled Craziness'' *(Rendan pian)*, we read: ''Liu Ling would invariably drink too much and lose control. Once at a gathering in his house he ripped off all his clothes, and became the object of mockery. Liu Ling shouted: 'Heaven and earth is my home, and the walls of this room are my clothes, so what are you lot doing down my pants?' '' The Wei-Jin scholar Ruan Ji proclaimed, ''What do the Confucian rites have to offer to our generation?'' If we peruse the dramatic lyrics *(sanqu)* of the Yuan dynasty, we find many poems filled with the spirit of roguish self-mockery. The dramatist Guan Hanqing wrote: ''I am the leader of the lunatics. For most of my life I've done willows and buds, slept with the willows and moved with the plants. '' Zhou Zhongbin wrote: ''You ask why I call a deer a horse and a phoenix a chicken? Well, I'm as confused as everyone else about just what is the truth.'' Liu Shizhong wrote: ''The floating life is a meaningless rave, achievement's absurd, as is fame.'' The Ming-dynasty writer Shen Kua in his *Mengxi bitan* (Notes from Dream Stream) described the compositions of these Yuan lyricists as ''satirical, roguish works,'' and the Ming writer Sun Daya in his *Preface to the Anthology of the Pipes of Heaven* described the Yuan lyricist Bai Pu as ''a cynical lout.''

These few examples serve to illustrate that the freewheeling rogue spirit expressive of ennui and nihilism is a stance adopted throughout ancient history by Chinese intellectuals seeking to escape from political darkness. It is no accident that a similar stance should resurface in the modern period in the scholarly writings of Lin Yutang and in the artistic philosophy of rogue humor of the 1990s.

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